

# Bending the Arc of Politics toward Zion

## Voices from Mormon Women for Ethical Government

*Jennifer Walker Thomas and Emma Petty Addams*

At the conclusion of the Montgomery bus boycott in 1956, Martin Luther King Jr. paraphrased the words of Theodore Parker to situate small battles for justice within a larger movement toward God's ideal world. Parker, a Boston abolitionist, beautifully described the ache of discipleship that results when spirits reach for worlds they cannot quite see: "I do not pretend to understand the moral universe; the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but little ways; I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by the experience of sight; I can divine it by conscience. And from what I see I am sure it bends towards justice."<sup>1</sup>

Though we cannot see beyond a little way, the members of Mormon Women for Ethical Government (MWEG) share in this vision of a more peaceful, just, and ethical world. This vision is grounded firmly in a vision of Zion and a hope in Christ and his redemptive power.

Over the last five years, we have sought to transform the way women of our faith community engage with the temporal mechanisms of power. Can a set of women, many without specific political training but who are willing to ground their work in faith and discipleship, make a difference? Can they wield power in new ways? Our lived experience is teaching us daily that they can.

We are realizing that engaging with politics this way is not only productive but protective. By creating a community of women with political identities that reflect their most authentic selves, and by teaching them

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1. Theodore Parker, "Of Justice and the Conscience," in *Ten Sermons of Religion* (Boston: Crosby, Nichols, 1853), 84–85.

to communicate peacefully, we are becoming powerful advocates not just for ethical government but also for our faith. This emerging power is being used in creative ways to defend and support our norms and institutions, to be moderating voices in political conversations at every level of government, and to advocate for real and lasting policy solutions that bless the lives of others.

We are grateful for this opportunity to share our story in our own voices. For us this work is engaging and deeply pragmatic—we seek for measurable change now. We believe that the doctrines and scriptures of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ contain a theological vision of a Zion that could be. As women of faith, we are working to bend society toward that end.

### **Building toward Zion**

Zion is a compelling and exciting objective. Because it is multifaceted and promises the creation of a society where we can be our most authentic selves while living in harmony with all of God’s children under his law, it may appeal to each of us differently. If we are hungry and suffering from want, in Zion we will be fed. Are we fearful for ourselves or others who face injustice and cruelty? We will find equality and safety. Citizens of Zion will not suffer under the threat of violence and war or face societal contention. Zion offers the promise of productivity without exploitation, collaboration without compulsion, and security from corruption. The promise of Zion is a promise of peace for all who desire it.

The term Beloved Community originated with nineteenth-century religious philosopher Josiah Royce, who used it to describe the highest form of community: one in which members exhibit loyalty to universal principles, use pure communication, and have congruent understandings of truth.<sup>2</sup> Royce’s vision of a collaborative effort in pursuit of higher ideals resonated deeply with Martin Luther King Jr., and he adopted the term Beloved Community to describe an idealized but achievable civic community. King and his followers envisioned societies where citizens were motivated by love and worked through nonviolent means within government systems to establish economic, social, and political justice.<sup>3</sup> The founding members of MWEG adopted this language to describe the community that we are working together to build.

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2. Kelly A. Parker and Scott Pratt, “Josiah Royce,” in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, December 2021, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/royce/>.

3. See “The Beloved Community,” The King Center, <https://thekingcenter.org/about-tkc/the-king-philosophy/>.

We envision the Beloved Community as a bridge between our current political systems and the vision of Zion. As we experience them today, these systems do not allow for the fullest exercise of agency nor do they promote collaboration. Instead, they are increasingly marked by rancor, discrimination, violence, and enmity. Within these systems, citizens live with growing disparities in opportunity, safety, and wealth.

King and Royce also lived in periods characterized by violence and injustice, but they nonetheless believed that the Beloved Community could take root in our national soil. This was not naïve. So many of the elements necessary to construct a new moral framework for our politics have been evident in American civic life and our political tradition. By remembering the best of what we have been and using it to pave a new vision for the future, we believe as they did in the possibility that we can grow beyond a cynical and hopeless view of American politics. The promise of Zion cannot be fulfilled if we retreat to our homes and congregations, caring only for our own. We must engage hopefully and bravely with the world.

Faith is “the substance of things hoped for”; we believe that by dedicating ourselves to building the Beloved Community we are offering to the world “evidence of things” that they cannot otherwise see (Heb. 11:1). As children of the covenant, we have the opportunity to provide light and vision—illuminating spaces and lives that would otherwise suffer in darkness. We help others to look for “a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God” (Heb. 11:10).

## **Developing Women**

Bridging the gap between our current political reality and the lofty goals of Zion will require many laborers with a diverse array of perspectives and skills. Our organizational efforts are focused on building a society in which the women of our faith are able to participate in impactful ways, alongside their fellow citizens. MWEG allows individual women to fulfil their potential and encourages the unique contributions that women can make to the common good.

Our objectives are political, but our process is rooted in personal change. It won't be possible to develop a new kind of political engagement without defining and supporting a new pattern of citizenship. Women still trail men in almost every measure of political engagement,<sup>4</sup> and our nation is poorer for it. MWEG is providing the scaffolding to

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4. Miki Caul Kittilson, “Gender and Political Behavior,” Oxford Research Encyclopedias, May 9, 2016, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.71>.

help women build a new identity as peaceful, competent, and principled citizens with the expectation that they will have the ability to change the political landscape in lasting and ethical ways.

### **A Women's Organization**

*Throughout history, women have been denied the opportunity to fully contribute. But this is counter to what our Heavenly Father wants for his children, including his daughters. I love that MWEG empowers women to understand issues, know how those issues intersect with their own values, and take action to defend the values and the issues that matter to them. I also now understand much more deeply how important it is to use my capacity to defend those whose opportunity is constricted by unjust laws.*  
—Lisa Rampton Halverson, director of Engage Communications<sup>5</sup>

Zion is a complex endeavor based on the idea that all of its citizens consecrate their talents and means to achieve its aims. A Zion community will also provide an environment in which all of our heavenly parents' children can develop those talents; we cannot consecrate what we have not been allowed to grow. As MWEG has developed beyond its first days as a Facebook discussion group, our leadership has tried to consciously build an organization around what women need and what they have to offer. Governing by a core set of values, prioritizing a diversity of voices, and making decisions in councils all support two critical objectives: building the capacity of women and directing that capacity outward to structure a society that allows others to achieve their own potential.

The four core values at the root of our organization (faithful, peaceful, nonpartisan, and proactive) ground our efforts. These values balance and inform each other and are overseen by four senior leaders, each with the title “root director,” who work together to keep us centered and on course. Giving these values equal weight in political discussions created an unexpectedly productive tension. That tension has supported innovative political and civic thought.

Weaving these values into our day-to-day work operations requires cultivating concrete collaborative skills to support a diversity of voices. Peace born of sameness is illusory. To rise above partisanship and respect

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5. It is the authors' intent that this article reflect the experience and contributions of current MWEG leadership. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from MWEG leaders found in this piece are drawn from an internal MWEG survey that invited open-ended responses. Every member of our current leadership team participated, and their perspectives provide the basis for this article.

the spectrum of ways that faith can meaningfully inform politics, we need input from a broad group of women with diverse life experiences.

This sort of a collaborative ideal takes time, patience, and clear intent. It also means allowing for conflict and recognizing that peace is not merely an absence of tension—true peace can never take root where women are afraid to disagree. Organizationally, we had to learn to distinguish between productive conflict and discordant contention. Relational change strategist Dr. LaShawn Williams offered us a new framework that allowed us to think about and utilize the tensions that arise from diversity: *mutual empathy*. This framework describes the process of trying “to understand another’s meaning system from his/her frame of reference and [maintaining an] ongoing and sustained interest in the inner world of the other.”<sup>6</sup> Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Director Charlotte Mountain played a pivotal role in paving the way for all our leaders to recognize the essential nature of mutual empathy within the work we do, describing these efforts toward inclusion as honoring the “bouquet of humanity.”<sup>7</sup>

Dr. Williams, Mountain, and others have taught our leaders and members that advocating for ethical government requires understanding lives and circumstances different from our own. Mutual empathy implies something beyond interest or compassion but also an intent to pursue a sincere relationship. Our discussion spaces help create those empathetic relationships among women who otherwise would not know one another, and these relationships contribute to the growth of a complex community. Mountain describes how we can each foster this empathy: “Often when we do not understand . . . we instinctively want to belittle or ridicule. We often feel that our ways are superior to others. This can be because of an insecurity of our own or because of a fear of appearing less than knowledgeable in a certain scenario. Pushing past fears and insecurities can turn an internal conflict into a constructive conflict in which one can ask for help and education.”

Mastering constructive conflict is a critical skill for citizens of a diverse community who share a desire for unity based on sincere love rather than conformity.

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6. Judith V. Jordan, *The Meaning of Mutuality* (Wellesley, Mass.: Wellesley Centers for Women, 1986), 2.

7. Charlotte Mountain, “Stand as a Witness—and Join the Bouquet of Humanity,” *Voices of MWEG*, April 21, 2021, <https://womenmakingpeace.org/2021/04/stand-as-a-witness-and-join-the-bouquet-of-humanity/>.

As we try to create a new kind of organization, we have a chance to practice these skills in our own governance. MWEG has adopted a model of internal governance supported by collaborative councils. Our very best work happens when it is designed, written, and executed collaboratively by women who experience the world in different ways, and these councils accommodate a diversity of perspective. They also facilitate the sharing of information and decision-making throughout leadership. We are learning that councils work only when all parties are informed, humble, courageous, secure, and open. Jill Piacitelli, our director of development, explains: “MWEG has taught me more about how functional councils feel. Even though there is a semblance of hierarchy with the MWEG organizational structure, I don’t find myself deferring or withholding. I think I have done that in church settings (and it had bled into work), thinking I was simply deferring to someone in a particular role, but I am only now realizing that I was worried about challenging authority.”

By assigning women distinct roles in councils, allowing them to be contributors, collaborators, or stewards, we are able to increase participation and offer clear expectations, thereby reducing confusion and conflict that in other settings is managed authoritatively.

### **Community**

*As a woman, specifically a Mormon woman, I have frequently felt the pressure of “supposed-tos”—look, behave, talk, think, and even aspire in a prescribed manner—and an accompanying guilt when I felt I was an outlier. The sisterhood of MWEG gives me confidence to claim my thoughts, my voice, and my individual worth, while encouraging me to learn, grow, and act. A place to belong. A desire to do more. Tools for growth. That’s my MWEG. —Kimberly Powell, chapter director*

Women of faith building a more peaceful, just, and ethical world—this is MWEG’s vision statement. There are likely millions of women in our faith alone who harbor a desire to contribute to the peace and justice of the world around them, who have felt the whisper of a voice saying, “Peace, peace be unto you because of your faith in my Well Beloved, who was from the foundation of the world” (Hel. 5:47). That peace is strengthened when we experience that witness alongside others, as Nephi and Lehi did. The three hundred Lamanites who heard this message of peace joined together in a communal effort to share their vision, and their efforts led to a period of great conversion and joy.

This is the kind of expanding community that we are attempting to build as we serve the needs of women associated with our faith who want to make an impact. A sustaining and catalyzing community should support them spiritually and emotionally, offer them the freedom to express and develop independent opinions, coalesce around shared values, and exhibit respect and understanding for the wide variety of obligations and commitments that women must also meet.

Each year MWEG conducts a survey of our members to keep in touch with their expectations and needs. Open-response questions repeatedly tell us that during an unsettling period, the organization has provided a place of belonging and personal development. They offer words like *lifesaver*, *respite*, *anchor*, and *comfort* to describe their relationship with our community. They describe what the community offers using terms like *empowerment*, *knowledge*, and *light*.

This has been particularly true for women trying to reconcile politics and faith. When pushed aside by family or church communities because of political opinions that might diverge from those of other individuals, women have found an antidote to isolation and loneliness in a faithful community of supportive friends. The group has also helped women to build and sustain personal faith. Meredith Gardner, our media literacy director, is a convert to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and she explains that “being a part of MWEG has cultivated within me a true sense of belonging within our faith community. I have been enriched and spiritually nourished through the relationships I have built with my fellow MWEG sisters.”

Our members find ways to contribute to their civic environment alongside obligations to home, work, and family. Recognizing this, we provide a variety of ways that women can engage, depending on their available time, interest level, and talents. Megan Woods, our nonpartisan root director, articulates the type of service the community provides for her: “I feel free to be and express myself in ways I don’t in other communities. In addition to expressing my political views, I can ask questions and receive answers without judgment. It is also a space where other members understand and relate to the specific challenges of being a mother and the many demands on all women.”

For many of our MWEG members, this community has been transformative, enhancing their ability to engage proactively with a troubled world. They wanted to be involved, but before MWEG they were unsure of where to obtain information and form political associations they could trust. This kind of civic confusion in combative settings can lead

to despair and detachment, leaving good women unwilling to do the work of citizenship. Fortunately, this detachment can be counteracted by community and hope.

*At a time when it would be easy to fall into despair about the polarization in our country, MWEG helps me hold on to hope. It fills me with hope when I see the women of MWEG—who often see the world very differently from each other—step away from the partisan strongholds that have gripped our political landscape to unite in the cause of creating peace and promoting ethical government. To find a space where women are engaging with difficult topics in creative and peaceful ways has been refreshing and inspiring. —Amy Gold Douglas, past faithful root director*

### Peaceful and Principled Citizens

*MWEG has helped me hone my peacemaking skills and helped me engage in a less combative way, which more authentically reflects my religious beliefs. —Cristie Carter Bake, engage director, Environmental Stewardship*

Even within a community where the bonds of sisterhood are strong, there will inevitably be conflict. Such conflict offers the opportunity to learn new skills and to practice the peacemaking that is needed with friends and family members and in the offices of elected officials. The messy, uncomfortable part of community building helps us grow and develop the resilience needed to engage in politics, but it also becomes a hallmark of a particular type of advocacy informed by Christian beliefs and is a fulfillment of the Savior’s promise, “Walk in the meekness of my Spirit, and you shall have peace in me” (D&C 19:23).

Like any other skill, peacemaking must be repeatedly practiced in order to be useful in stressful situations. MWEG provides specific, direct training for our leaders and members in the form of Practical Peacemaking,<sup>8</sup> a program led by trained mediator and MWEG peaceful root director Emily Taylor.

The skills provided in peacemaking training are needed in a wide range of settings that are currently marked by significant tension. Denise Grayson, a past proactive root director, explains how this initiative has changed her social media interactions: “As I comment on [social media] posts, I focus on being peaceful, not confrontational. I shared my opinion of the Floyd killing last year. Instead of blowing up to a remark by

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8. “Practical Peacemaking,” Mormon Women for Ethical Government, February 15, 2022, <https://www.mormonwomenforethicalgovernment.org/practicalpeacemaking>.



a fellow Church member, I tried to address his frustrations and understand his point of view.” Social media—a vehicle for many political interactions—thrives on contentious, toxic, and fear-based communication. MWEГ members are participating differently.

These peacemaking skills are practical in a variety of other areas, such as communications with difficult family or ward members, or engagement with dismissive or contentious legislators. Women now have the ability to redirect conversations that are spinning toward contention and instead help people feel heard and understood. These skills strengthen connections and increase the capacity of our women to be forceful and principled advocates. Peaceful engagement is a distinctive expression of power.

*MWEГ honestly has let me be comfortable to not align myself with any political ideology because I have learned to find value in a variety of political viewpoints. This has truly allowed me to weigh candidates and issues from a core principled place. And it has allowed me to act freely, and not render my agency to a political party.* —Shauna Fisher, senior director of operations

As Americans have become more politically polarized, they have begun to see party affiliation as a core aspect of personal identity.<sup>9</sup> This overidentification with political parties and ideologies makes us less willing to negotiate, more likely to see our neighbors as our enemy, and generally increases the stakes of elections. It will take conscious efforts to trade enmity for empathy. Tiffany Tertipes, our creative director, notes, “MWEГ reminds me regularly that those who embrace differing ideals from my own do so not out of lack of care or understanding, but rather because their life experiences have shown them the benefits of a different path to a similar goal. Remembering this, that there are many roads to the same destination, keeps me from becoming unintentionally swept up in partisan rhetoric and helps me stay focused on how my personal faith intersects with my advocacy work.”

As a nonpartisan organization grounded in faith, we try to respect those different roads, assessing issues and policy using the doctrines of our faith and MWEГ’s Principles of Ethical Government.<sup>10</sup> But to do this as

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9. Michael Dimock and Richard Wike, “America Is Exceptional in the Nature of Its Political Divide,” Pew Research Center, November 13, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/11/13/america-is-exceptional-in-the-nature-of-its-political-divide/>.

10. “Principles of Ethical Government,” Mormon Women for Ethical Government, February 15, 2022, <https://www.mormonwomenforethicalgovernment.org/principles-of-ethical-government>.

an organization, we must be able to do this as individuals. This reassessment is made easier by opportunities to hear the perspectives of others who share our faith but not necessarily our politics, or to examine how our life experiences may have shaped our opinions and political affiliations, and to practice the peacemaking skills developed within MWEG. These interactions build the capacity for flexibility and charity in our members.

During the 2020 election season, the MWEG team came up with a name to describe the identity that our members were increasingly moving toward: *principled voter*.<sup>11</sup> This is “Golden Rule” voting, which looks closely at the needs of the broader community. Like so many others, Rachel Scholes, our encircle director, found that the experience of being a principled voter opened her up to new ways of thinking:

*I had long believed that members of the church, if truly living the gospel, had to belong to one political party. And I belonged to that party. . . . I voted, but I put little thought into my decisions. I had lots of excuses as a mother of 7 littles with no extra time on her hands, but the truth is, I was politically lazy when it came time to cast my ballot. Everyone with a certain letter in front of their name got my vote.*

*For the 2020 election, I took MWEG’s challenge to be a principled voter. Before I took to studying the candidates, I made a list of my values and beliefs. I clarified on paper my beliefs about immigration, about health care, about voting rights, about the environment, about education. After I made this list, I studied the candidates—what they had said, what their voting records showed, and who was supporting them. I got together with MWEG friends and shared what we had learned with each other. And then I gathered my voting eligible family members and we shared what we knew. And we sat and voted according to our consciences and beliefs and values. It felt so freeing and so good to do that. And I ended up voting for candidates from both parties.*

As women carefully evaluate their political choices rather than voting and advocating in a knee-jerk way, their religious beliefs and political choices are more thoughtfully aligned. They feel the comfort and peace that comes from living true to their faith and who they are. Kimberly Powell wrote, “My time in MWEG has shown me that my political identity is not the name of a political party. Instead, my political identity is a reflection of who I am as a child of God. My responsibility is to listen more and strive for understanding and connection, not bound by party lines.”

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11. “Know Your Vote: Grow Your Vote,” Mormon Women for Ethical Government, February 15, 2022, <https://www.mormonwomenforethicalgovernment.org/know-your-vote>.

## Principles of Ethical Government

*The process of working with my fellow MWEG sisters to draft the Principles of Ethical Government was an edifying experience. It was deeply enlightening to study stories and principles in the scriptures and other Church teachings about ethical government, coupled with the principles in various civil documents such as the U.S. Constitution, Bill of Rights, Federalist Papers, and Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and to weave them together into a foundational framework to guide MWEG's advocacy and priorities. —Rachel Esplin Odell, past proactive root director*

Early in our organizational development, we realized that our organizational actions and advocacy efforts needed to be pinned to distinct principles that were independent of the opinions of MWEG leaders. Led by Lisa Rampton Halverson and Rachel Esplin Odell, a group of women collaborated to create our Principles of Ethical Government.<sup>12</sup> In broad terms, these principles can be described as the three sides of a balanced triangle (see fig. 1):

**Rights:** Every human being is endowed with rights that governments are obligated to protect and not violate.

**Rule of Law:** Every government official and institution has a duty to respect the rule of law.

**Responsibilities:** All human beings are mutually accountable to their fellow human beings.

The Principles of Ethical Government acknowledge that the health of our democracy rests on the rule of law and balancing the rights and responsibilities of citizens. We

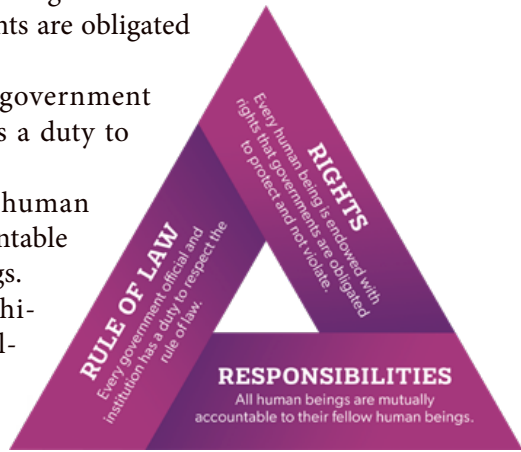


FIGURE 1. Principles of Ethical Government.

believe that rights, responsibilities, and legal structures must each be respected, protected, and strengthened to maintain ethical governance. We use this document to shape both our immediate responses to political events and our long-term advocacy efforts. It also allows us to introduce

12. "Principles of Ethical Government."

modern scripture and our unique religious values to other individuals and organizations with which we work.

These principles help guide our members as they link their own inherent value systems to the defense of government norms. Jill Piacitelli describes how highlighting these core ideas expanded the lens through which she viewed her own government: “The first time I’d ever even consciously heard the phrase ‘rule of law’ was at an MWEG meeting. I’ve now gone to every session offered by MWEG on this [subject] and become much more aware of it. . . . It has been powerful to understand how the rule of law holds democracy together, and how this looks in other places outside of the United States.”

Citizens who understand our systems, what benefits they offer us, and what is at stake should we lose them are better able to engage purposefully in their defense.

The Principles of Ethical Government also require the ethical work of protecting others’ rights as vigorously as we defend our own, acknowledging that citizens’ rights are periodically in competition. The full expression of rights by one individual can directly inhibit the rights of another. At MWEG we have come to see our constitutionally granted rights as temporal approximations of the divine laws dictating the value of all human beings. These rights ideally create a society in which each individual can freely exercise their agency without meeting unjust oppression. This vision for a just community is beautifully expressed by Mosiah: “And now I desire that this inequality should be no more in this land, especially among this my people; but I desire that this land be a land of liberty, and every man may enjoy his rights and privileges alike, so long as the Lord sees fit that we may live and inherit the land, yea, even as long as any of our posterity remains upon the face of the land” (Mosiah 29:32).

Once we begin to approach politics from a perspective of love and with an eye toward a more just future, it is easier to understand the idea of mutual accountability. We can more clearly see that assaults on anyone’s rights are assault on our own, and that these assaults slowly undermine the integrity of our political and governing systems. They generate anger and cynicism that corrodes our trust in institutions and our fellow citizens. Catherine Eslinger, who directs our empower limb, explains how she herself experienced this transformation: “I was reflecting today about a recent polarizing news story. . . . Our organization’s pull toward faith and reminders of our covenants to love one another have increased my empathy for all sides and all people affected, and

helped me to better ‘mourn with those that mourn’ and see where their rights are being impacted.”

Using the Principles of Ethical Government to guide our advocacy has moved us away from narrow and combative ideological frameworks and toward political and civic interactions that reflect our religious ideals.

*Theologically, LDS people claim a Christian heritage that celebrates community. The Old Testament followers of God wrote about themselves as a people with whom God interacted and planned for collectively. Yet in LDS theology we also claim the premortal existence in which each individual spirit had the ability to choose to follow Christ and accept mortality. The influence of MWEG has helped me create space to think through both of those identities in regard to policies. Democracy reflects both of these for me. Each person deserves a voice, an opinion, a right to vote. Yet we live collectively in community, so policies can't just be about ‘the one’; they must be about us as a people. —Abby Greenwald, chapters director*

### **Principles in Action**

MWEG was born in a moment of chaos and reckoning that revealed our constitutional government and its institutions to be more fragile and susceptible to abuse than we had realized. These disruptions also brought to the surface significant and systemic inequities that helped us to see, in some instances for the first time, the full weight of our civic responsibilities. However, by grounding our efforts in the hope of redemption and a desire to express discipleship, we are making political efforts that involve women in the work of both building and restoring.

### **Protecting Constitutional Government and Political Systems**

*Before joining MWEG, I had a sense that the government was a negative institution that needed to be minimized and controlled. Since joining MWEG, I have developed a great admiration and trust in our systems and the good that can come from the government. I have also begun to recognize the frailty of our systems when everyday citizens aren't actively engaged and defending those institutions and norms. —Christie Black, engage manager, compassionate immigration*

Members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have always had an appreciation for the Constitution, acknowledging that the Lord allowed it to be established and maintained expressly “for the rights and protection of all flesh” (D&C 101:77). Over the years, the document has been amended in critical ways that have expanded access to these rights and protections

to an ever-widening circle of citizens. These expansions have brought the document itself into closer alignment with our highest national values.

As women, we are acutely aware that expanding democratic representation and bringing our existing government into alignment with lofty values has been the work of generations. We are also aware that this same inspired document contained deep flaws that intentionally exposed many souls to centuries of violence, tyranny, and oppression. We can see and embrace both of these realities at once, using our faith in what is good to drive our efforts to rectify and repair the bad.

Linking government to the will of the people was an act of significant hope with a hidden risk: the health of our intricate systems of government reflects the virtue of our citizens. Understanding this fragility and our individual responsibility to sustain our way of government for current and future generations, our members have made significant commitments to support our constitutional system. Over the last year these efforts have focused on protecting the right of every citizen to vote in free and fair elections.

*When I found MWEG, I finally felt I had a safe, principled space to articulate how my spiritual beliefs inform my politics. My recent effort within MWEG to support the protection of voting rights for every American is inseparable from my core belief in the equal humanity and divinity of all children of God. I hope in my discipleship to follow Christ's example of speaking out for justice even when you may face resistance.* —Erin Young, assistant engage director, Protecting Democracy

The decision to prioritize work to protect the freedom to vote has its foundations in our belief that democratic government is a “political manifestation of the worth of souls”<sup>13</sup> and that this form of government is best suited to protect the people against coercion and corruption. By ensuring access to the vote, the women of MWEG are expressing a sincere commitment to obey the second great commandment—promising that as disciples we will love our neighbors as we love ourselves. Loving our neighbors includes assuring their right to self-determination.<sup>14</sup>

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13. “Official Statement from Mormon Women for Ethical Government on a Faith-Based Defense of the Freedom to Vote,” Mormon Women for Ethical Government, October 28, 2021, <https://library.mormonwomenforethicalgovernment.org/official-statement-from-mormon-women-for-ethical-government-on-a-faith-based-defense-of-the-freedom-to-vote/>.

14. “Principles of Ethical Government: Maximize Participation and Equitable Access,” Mormon Women for Ethical Government May 7, 2021, <https://library.mormon>

On the other hand, when political structures and electoral systems are manipulated to structurally aggregate power in the hands of the few, those structures devalue souls, allow for the exercise of unrighteous influence, and undermine efforts to build communities driven by Christ-like love. Wendy Dennehy has tirelessly led our Protecting Democracy initiative during a particularly turbulent period. She explains how small changes in policy, motivated by a desire to exercise unrighteous power, can do lasting damage:

*As we were creating the structure for Engage: Protecting Democracy, I began researching the processes of representation. We were headed into a census year, and I learned that representation involves census taking, reapportionment, and redistricting, which all culminate in the personal act of voting. As I have watched these processes play out, I have realized that they are being executed in ways that are neither fair nor just. They dilute the power of the individual vote and make it difficult for elections to be fair. We are seeing power—particularly political party power—overpowering the voice of the people at each of these steps. This has steeled my desire to make a difference in some small way to ensure the sanctity of the vote for every eligible voter.*

Other examples of the attempt to subjugate our neighbors can be found in voter disenfranchisement,<sup>15</sup> disparate access to polling and ballots,<sup>16</sup> gerrymandering,<sup>17</sup> racially discriminatory voter registration laws,<sup>18</sup> foreign interference in elections,<sup>19</sup> and efforts to privilege voters of one party

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[womenforethicalgovernment.org/principles-of-ethical-government-maximize-participation-and-equitable-access/](https://www.womenforethicalgovernment.org/principles-of-ethical-government-maximize-participation-and-equitable-access/).

15. “Everyone Deserves the Freedom to Vote,” Mormon Women for Ethical Government, October 14, 2021, <https://library.mormonwomenforethicalgovernment.org/every-one-deserves-the-freedom-to-vote/>.

16. “Official Statement from Mormon Women for Ethical Government on the Importance of Counting Every Vote,” Mormon Women for Ethical Government, November 3, 2020, <https://library.mormonwomenforethicalgovernment.org/official-statement-from-mormon-women-for-ethical-government-on-the-importance-of-counting-every-vote/>.

17. “MWEG UT Official Statement on 2021 Redistricting,” Mormon Women for Ethical Government, November 11, 2021, <https://library.mormonwomenforethicalgovernment.org/mweg-ut-official-statement-on-2021-redistricting/>.

18. “Call to Action: Ask Your Senator to Bring the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act to Debate,” Mormon Women for Ethical Government, October 26, 2021, <https://library.mormonwomenforethicalgovernment.org/call-to-action-ask-your-senator-to-bring-the-john-lewis-voting-rights-advancement-act-to-debate/>.

19. “Official Statement from Mormon Women for Ethical Government on the House Impeachment Vote,” Mormon Women for Ethical Government, December 18, 2019,

over those of another.<sup>20</sup> The Book of Mormon clearly and repeatedly warns us that those who work to suppress freedom and aggregate power to themselves are not of God. Ultimately, and without exception, they bring destruction upon their societies.

In our efforts to protect democratic representation and the sanctity of our elections, we have had the opportunity to collaborate with left- and right-leaning organizations—Americans who are motivated by faith, heritage, love of the law, or simple patriotism to protect this fundamental civil right. In each of these spaces, the women of MWEG are able to act as moderating voices bridging diverse viewpoints and perspectives. We have also found great hope in the knowledge that there are many good people working to respond intelligently and peacefully to antidemocratic efforts.

### Advocacy of Discipleship

*As a disciple of Christ, I have a solemn responsibility to love and care for others. MWEG has empowered me to be a knowledgeable advocate not only for my own family, but also for other families and individuals who are marginalized and in need of support. Our Principles of Peacemaking have helped me understand that true peace is a peace that encompasses justice for all groups. —Melarie Wheat, Utah chapter co-coordinator*

The aim of our political frameworks is to defend “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”<sup>21</sup> The practical building blocks of those ideals are the legal and policy decisions that create opportunity, safety, health, community, and equality. Perhaps as women we are particularly attuned to these practically applied ideals because of our work in a range of environments that directly connect us to human needs. As teachers, caregivers, mothers, family members, employees, employers, and in our unique religious sisterhood focused on providing relief, we are called to grapple with others’ lived experiences.

As women, we are particularly drawn toward policy and systems that protect the totality of the human soul, both body and spirit (see D&C 88:15),

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<https://library.mormonwomenforethicalgovernment.org/official-statement-from-mormon-women-for-ethical-government-on-the-house-impeachment-vote/>.

20. “Principles of Nonpartisanship,” Mormon Women for Ethical Government, February 15, 2022, <https://library.mormonwomenforethicalgovernment.org/principles-of-nonpartisanship/>.

21. “The Declaration of Independence,” National Archives, updated October 7, 2021, <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration>.



because we know that our bodies are integral to our exaltation; they connect us to our future inheritance as our spirits connect us to our premortal heritage. We believe we have a covenant responsibility to relieve temporal suffering, patterning our engagement on the mortal ministry of Jesus Christ, who attended to the physical needs of those he taught, modeling compassion for the ways in which functional bodies impact spiritual development.

We have tried to lead in these policy efforts with sincere and Christ-like love. The most recent period of American politics has been marred by a sharp rise in enmity. As citizens, we seem to feel that the political sphere is a morality-free zone where we can speak harshly of our opponents, cruelly about the needy, and indifferently and disdainfully regarding the marginalized. This harms others, but it also harms us and weakens our disciple-hearts. Megan Seawright, our senior director of communications, describes an alternative path: “The commandment to love one another is at the heart of my discipleship and my advocacy. Inequities pull me to advocate for change that will bless and benefit all members of our community. As I have come to understand the role that effective policy plays in this, I see advocating for improved policies and laws as a way to put my discipleship into action, to actively love my brothers and sisters.”

Shauna Fisher beautifully describes the ways that women are making advocacy part of their lives as a response to a spiritual impulse. She describes what she sees in our chapters: “I have seen women connect in local areas and step up because they have found themselves called to do something. They have felt the promptings that they must act and because of that they do the hard things that are difficult for them and get to work. They squeeze their advocacy work into the nooks and crannies of their lives and are moving mountains.”

This perspective has also framed our wide-ranging political engagement. In addition to protecting democracy and speaking out against unethical actions by leaders, discipleship has pulled us toward the fight for bipartisan and compassionate immigration reform, protecting the environment for future generations, rooting out racism, and protecting vulnerable women.

These are policy objectives that protect the vulnerable from the strong. In alignment with scriptural admonitions, we focus on supporting policies that protect the weak, the marginalized, and the young from those who would exploit them for personal gain. Exploitation corrupts all parties, diminishes moral and individual capacity, inhibits

personal responsibility, and borrows from the future to pay for present indulgence. Jillaire McMillan, our director of volunteers, explains, “My political involvement is often motivated by a desire to see all of God’s children—especially the vulnerable—treated with greater compassion, equality, and equity. I think people see politics as a separate thing from the gospel, as a hobby or profession rather than an extension of believing that our actions affect each other and that our governing should be done with a sense of how policies can relieve suffering. The Savior spent his life relieving suffering, and political advocacy is as much a way to do that as a service project or individual ministering relationship.”

### **Redefining Power**

*MWEG has changed how I look at power in a couple ways. First, it has shown me that there is greater power in collective good. There really is strength in numbers. Second, MWEG has taught me that there is power within each of us to call on heaven to ask for things we need in our advocacy work as much as in our personal lives. Using our spiritual gifts for the betterment of our communities by having more courage to love others than we may ever have for ourselves has given me power and confidence in God.* —Rachel Albertsen, director of special projects

Advocating for policies that protect the vulnerable paradoxically requires that we acknowledge our strengths and claim our power. Sometimes women of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints carry over patterns from their ecclesiastical relationships into community and civic engagement. Claiming power can feel transgressive. We have made significant progress in this regard by thinking about power differently, both redeeming our understanding of it and helping women to use it justly.

Doctrine and Covenants section 121 offers a view of how we can think differently about the ability to act and influence outcomes. This section is described by Patrick Mason and David Pulsipher as a “sublime meditation on the peaceful nature of godly power. . . . In contrast with the fleeting influence of coercive force, the revelation articulated a more expansive notion of enduring influence based on deep, unfailing love.”<sup>22</sup> This description of power in the spiritual realm expands how we think about what it takes to be effective advocates, for while our political

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22. Patrick Q. Mason and J. David Pulsipher, *Proclaim Peace: The Restoration’s Answer to an Age of Conflict* (Provo, Utah: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, Brigham Young University, 2021), 2–3.

engagement is not an expression of priesthood power, it is for us an expression of love.

How power is accumulated and used invests it with moral weight and is reflective of the presence or absence of love in those who claim and exercise it. When power emerges from collaboration and is sought with the intent to distribute it widely, it is less likely to corrupt the powerful, particularly when the end goal of using influence is driven by Christlike love and the desire to benefit others. Generating and utilizing power this way requires humility from all participating parties, and we believe that it enhances rather than diminishes trust between collaborators. This concept of righteous power can be utilized by anyone willing to lead “by long-suffering, by gentleness, by meekness, and by love unfeigned” (D&C 121:41).

Following divine guidance about power that flows from love is proving to be protective and enlightening.

Our first lesson in putting power to use has been to recognize the influence we have and take responsibility for the ways that we are impacting those around us. This is critical, because when exercising power is seen as transgressive, individuals may pretend that power differentials do not exist, even as they exercise influence. This is dishonest and can be damaging to those effected. When power is framed positively and women are allowed to have a healthy relationship with it, they are more likely to act with an honest awareness of the ability to determine outcomes and be more cognizant of where they can both bless or do harm. Danica Baird, our proactive root director, describes how her perspective of power is changing: “Power is ultimately the ability to make change or influence others. Too many women shy away from the word ‘power,’ when power is neither good nor bad in and of itself. It’s what you do with it that matters. MWEG has helped me realize we need more faithful women of integrity using power. Those who are cautious about using power are often the ones who should be wielding it.”

Naming, defining, and claiming individual power is only the first step. As we join together to advocate for change, we see the profound impact that we can have collectively. We strongly support structures and norms that distribute broadly both the expression of power and its benefits. The sharing of power not only inhibits those who would use it to “gratify pride or vain ambition” (D&C 121:37), but it also yields an exponentially greater good. In contexts where power is shared, more individuals are able to participate in its righteous exercise. Given the choice of one very good person exercising disproportionate power and millions of adequate people exercising a limited amount of power, we believe that

the latter will be productive of a much greater good. As Wendy Dennehy explains, “I have learned that individual power combined with others can create exponential power. I have realized that while I can use the power that I possess, it is most important that I use it thoughtfully and exercise it with others to champion causes that help the underserved and those whose voices our political society has silenced.” When we empower God’s children, we honor their agency and decrease the likelihood that they will suffer oppression.

Perhaps the most critical lesson in power has been to understand the connection between persuasion and the exercise of just power. In Doctrine and Covenants 121:37, we clearly learn that “to exercise control or dominion or compulsion upon the souls of the children of men” is to cross the boundaries into the unrighteous use of power. When persuasion is the primary means to achieve change, agency is respected, individuals have the chance to grow, and change happens without inequities in force. Persuasion allows both parties to be equal participants in the use of power to accomplish a shared objective. Women often understand this intuitively, having experienced situations where an imbalance of power was used to manipulate individuals or control outcomes. Of necessity, they have learned how to exercise power through persuasion.

As MWEG has increased in influence, we have recognized that in order to make lasting peace, we need to understand real and righteous power. This understanding is exactly what is needed in a nation marked by political violence in both word and deed. MWEG women recognize that in this critical area we can only lead by example, trying to live and model what it looks like to use power righteously.

*MWEG has helped me put into action a concept I have always known: that women have great talents and perspective and influence and that they should use them for good in the world. Power is not a bad word, although many inside and outside our community might think of it in a negative sense. But God gave us gifts, talents, abilities to help change the world for the better, and this is what it means to have and use power in righteous ways. —Meredith Gardner, director of media literacy*

## **Conclusion**

At the outset of this article we shared our vision of Zion. Paired with our desire for a Beloved Community that bridges the gap between that inspiring vision and our current reality, these aspirations drive our efforts. They push us forward when the work of political engagement in

defense of ethical government is draining and difficult. At this article's conclusion we ask each reader if you too share a vision of an earthly community that reflects our highest spiritual understandings, and if so, who do you see playing important roles there?

We offer two possible reasons that members of a covenant community do not yet feel the pull toward Zion. The first reason speaks more to our realities and natural response to them. Perhaps we do not seek Zion because individually we do not think we need it. We are not hungry or afraid. We live in safety and have community; the world has afforded us sufficient opportunities to grow, advance, and develop. In short, if we are not oppressed and hold sufficient power, we may not hunger for the relief that Zion will bring. In the Sermon on the Mount, the Lord offers a cautionary tale to those of us who are comfortable. He reminds us that the inheritors of God's kingdom are not those who enjoy a surfeit now but instead those who lack (see Matt. 5:3–12).

The other reason is less problematic. Perhaps we do not seek Zion because we have not yet sensed the beauty of its promise and vision. None of us have lived experience with such a divine community; we only have sparse narratives of people living in pure fellowship with each other and their God. Because of this, Zion is as elusive as it is perfect, and finding our way to it will require countless individual and communal choices made in faith. Those choices will need to be visionary, building upon prayer, discipline, and sacrifice. Ultimately, Zion must be constructed on shared principles, requiring us to embrace an entirely different kind of culture, economy, and community.

That community is born from unity. Zion is achieved when its people are of "one heart and one mind" (Moses 7:18), and it cannot be achieved by individuals complacent about the state of their own understandings and motivations. We walk toward it only when our own hearts are somehow broken open and we desire to align our will with God's. The call to Zion resonates with us when our broken hearts are touched by its beauty, when it answers our own prayers, or when we realize that there are those among us who desperately need what it has to offer. This last path to Zion is selfless and reflective of pure discipleship.

While we wait for the formal call to Zion, we can use this brokenness to offer healing to the world. The members of MWEG are internalizing the scriptural declaration "that governments were instituted of God for the benefit of man; and that he holds men accountable for their acts in relation to them, both in making laws and administering them, for the good and safety of society" (D&C 134:1). We all have the

opportunity to come together in a fallen world to support policy and governing systems that are reflective of our covenant relationships. By prioritizing the least among us and governing our fellow citizens as we ourselves would be governed, we can build a more ethical government in this place and in this moment.

We have deep faith that loving heavenly parents have provided a divine pathway for us to do what the world tells us is impossible—reconcile competing needs and create a society characterized by security and justice. The ideal of Zion provides patterns for political systems that will accomplish this, and the Lord has made clear repeatedly throughout scripture that those who walk the disciple’s path will enjoy an “everlasting dominion” that will flow unto them “forever and ever” (D&C 121:46). As we do our work in the political sphere, we are unexpectedly developing the skills and perspective of discipleship, and finding our way along that divine pathway toward reconciliation.

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*Note from the authors: In alignment with the values of a Zion community, MWEG has sought to be a collaborative and cooperative working environment. We have drawn on the ideas and thoughts of many women to develop our writings, opinion pieces, and programs. This article is no exception, and the authors are grateful for the many MWEG leaders who have contributed to the development of the organizational systems, ideas, and governing philosophies represented here.*

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